

3 Social Entrepreneurs and their Personality

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Learning goals

Upon completing this chapter, you should be able to accomplish the following:

- Understand the role of personality in entrepreneurship studies.
- Describe the current knowledge on the personality in social entrepreneurs.
- Name and explain the core elements of the entrepreneurial, and the prosocial personality of a social entrepreneur.

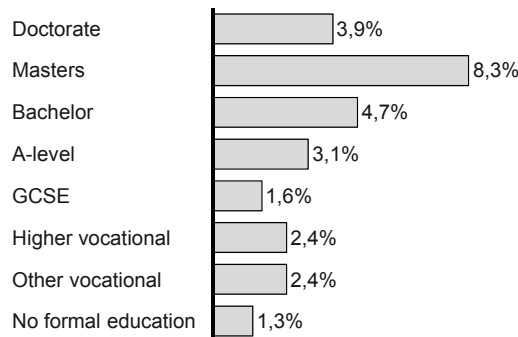
3.1 Introduction

Social entrepreneurial personality

The person of the social entrepreneur is a topic which is often discussed in popular literature in the field. To name examples, Bornstein's (2004) book "How to change the world: Social entrepreneurs and the power of new ideas" and Elkington and Hartigan's (2008) book "The power of unreasonable people - How social entrepreneurs create markets that change the world" both focus on individual entrepreneurs, their stories and their personality. So what can be said about these people who become social entrepreneurs?

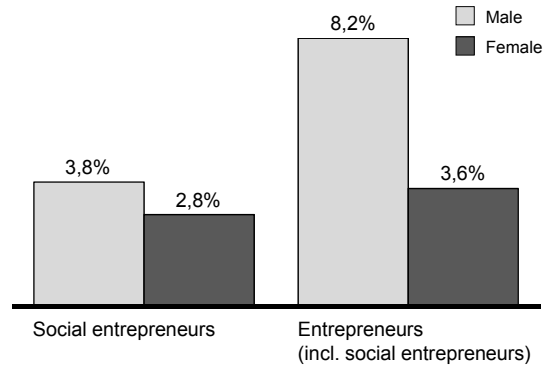
Looking into demographics, there doesn't seem to be a clear trend when it comes to social entrepreneurs. See **Figure 3.1** and **Figure 3.2**. Here, GEM studies can serve as a source of insight. The GEM is the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, a research consortium which produces the largest studies on entrepreneurial activity on a global level. In 2006, the GEM published a statistical report on levels of social entrepreneurship in the UK, and reported additional information on who the people are who become social entrepreneurs. These numbers show that social entrepreneurs are pretty much average people when it comes to demographics. They have various educational backgrounds – from no formal education to doctorates – and come from all ethnic groups. And even though there are slightly more male than female social entrepreneurs, there is no male dominance as in the case of commercial entrepreneurship. So why is it that so much razzmatazz is made about social entrepreneurs?

Figure 3.1 Share of people with respective degree who become social entrepreneurs



Own illustration based on Harding (2006)

Figure 3.2 Share of males or females who choose career path social entrepreneur or entrepreneur



Own illustration based on Harding (2006)

It seems to be the **personality** of the social entrepreneur which has fascinated practitioners and researchers. On the one hand, a large part of social entrepreneurship literature to date deals with the overarching category of the 'social entrepreneur' and their personality. This ranges from anecdotal tales about social entrepreneurs, telling of their extraordinary character (e.g., Bornstein, 2004; Elkington and Hartigan, 2008; Frances, 2008), to lists of attributes, to studies specifically dedicated to gaining further insight on the relevant traits of social entrepreneurs. Overall, research underlines that social entrepreneurs' personality is something special and unseen in other areas. And it goes as far as that some authors shape their entire definition of social entrepreneurship around the person of the social entrepreneur. Some examples can be seen in **Table 3.1** below.

Table 3.1 Definitions of social entrepreneurs or social entrepreneurship

Source	Definition
Bornstein, 2004, p. 1f.	"Transformative forces: people with new ideas to address major problems who are relentless in the pursuit of their visions, people who simply will not take "no" for an answer, who will not give up until they have spread their ideas as far as they possibly can"
Crutchfield and McLeod Grant, 2008, p. 24f.	"[...] they create social value; they relentlessly pursue new opportunities; they act boldly without being constrained by current resources; they innovate and adapt; and they are obsessed with results"
Roberts and Woods, 2005, p. 49	"[Social entrepreneurship is] the construction, evaluation and pursuit of opportunities for transformative social change carried out by visionary, passionately dedicated individuals"

Own table

Being of such interest, there seems to be something that makes a social entrepreneurial personality special. So what needs to be known about the social entrepreneurial personality, and what makes it so different?

Before taking a look into what this may entail, it seems reasonable to introduce a definition. For the course of this chapter *social entrepreneurial personality* is understood as a combination of stable traits common to social entrepreneurs, uncommon within the rest of the population, which cause them to act the way they do.

3.2 Personality in Entrepreneurship Studies

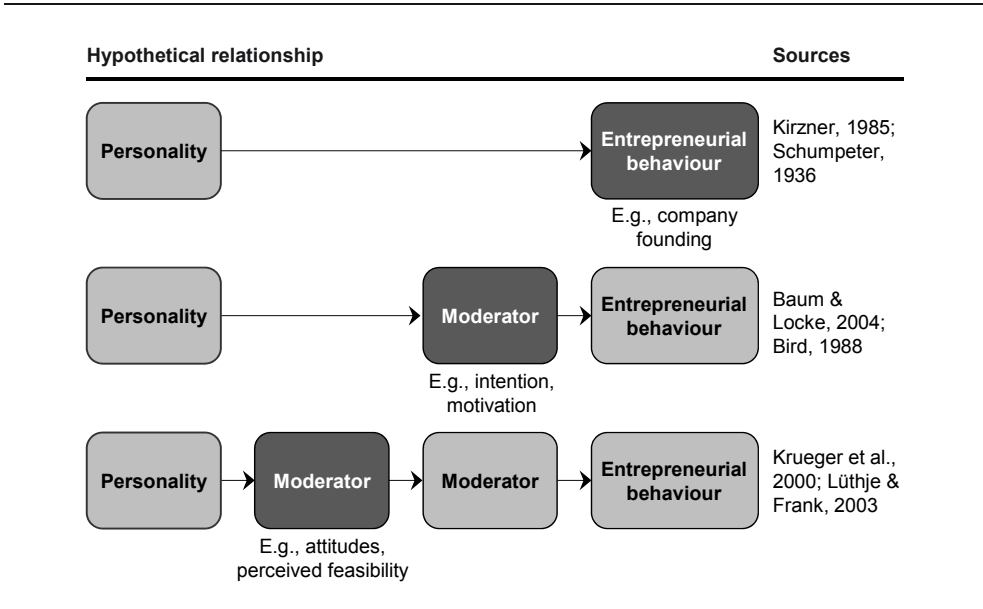
Looking into personality within entrepreneurial studies – to which social entrepreneurship belongs – is not an easy endeavour. For many years there has been a large discussion whether there is such thing as a personality which effects entrepreneurial behaviour.

Since the early days of entrepreneurship research, studies focused on the person of the entrepreneur and character traits, pioneers like Israel Kirzner and Joseph A. Schumpeter placing them in the heart of their entrepreneurship theories. This trend contributed to what is known as the traits approach of entrepreneurship, based on the traits school of personality. The traits school argues that certain behaviour is not solely based on learned reactions but on stable traits of the acting individual. These traits form dispositions to act a certain way and can be understood as propensities to act. Together, they make up a personality. The traits approach puts personality at the core of business entrepreneurship – and largely dominated the field of entrepreneurship research for many years. As research progressed, it became apparent that many studies on the topic only showed weak direct links between personality and entrepreneurship (e.g., Ajzen, 1991; Brockhaus, 1980). Nonetheless, some researchers continued to show enthusiasm for the role of personality in entrepreneurship research, and, in past years, research has shown that there are, in fact, links between personality and entrepreneurship (especially in the following meta-analyses: Collins, Hanges and Locke, 2004; Rauch and Frese, 2007). These recent studies come to the conclusion that previous inconsistent findings on the effect of personality on entrepreneurship were due to unclear definitions, measurement mistakes, or an incorrect selection of traits included in research (Cromie, 2000; Johnson, 1990). They argue the person of the entrepreneur back into the field, then as Johnson states “Individuals are, after all, the energizers of the entrepreneurial process” (Johnson, 1990, p. 48). Also, personality plays a significant role when situations are complex and uncertain, as is the case in entrepreneurship, especially in its initial stages.

Consequently, the personality of the entrepreneur has been increasingly included in recent studies. What has changed is that the role of personality is looked at in a more differentiated manner. On the one hand, the field has gone from looking at what entrepreneurs are like to what aspects of personality *motivate* entrepreneurs. On the other hand, it has also been discussed if personality has no direct but a profound indirect effect on entrepreneurship. Baum and Locke (2004), for example, found that traits indeed had an effect on enterprise

growth, yet indirectly through antecedents such as goals. Additionally, the assumption is no longer that the “entrepreneurial” traits are necessary or sufficient for entrepreneurial activity. Rather, they can be seen as facilitators of entrepreneurial activity, as the expected utility of being self-employed is higher for people who have the characteristics which can help successfully establish an enterprise (Bönte and Jarosch, 2010). Overall, it seems to be an interesting question to look at what makes up the personality of people acting entrepreneurially – in this case specifically as social entrepreneurs.

Figure 3.3 Different links between personality and entrepreneurial behaviour



Own illustration

At the same time, it must be mentioned that some sceptical voices are still to be heard, although they rather caution research to be more vigorous in the area than completely annihilate the important role of personality. Especially in social entrepreneurship some authors criticize the ‘cult’ towards social entrepreneurs’ personality in research (e.g., Paul C. Light). Selected studies have even found disapproval of this point of view within practicing organisations (Seanor and Meaton, 2007; Spear, 2006), who focus more on team-level processes and success than that on one individual in the enterprise. Nonetheless, the central role of social entrepreneurs’ personality both in practical social entrepreneurial support as well as research on the topic is apparent. As Bill Drayton – the founder of Ashoka – said when asked to define a social entrepreneur: “The core is personality [...]” (Meehan, 2004, p. 11). His organisation, in fact, believes that if you want to know if an idea is successful, you must focus on the person behind it.

3.3 Elements of the Social Entrepreneurial Personality

Authors suggest that the social entrepreneurial personality is a mixture of an *entrepreneurial* personality, on the one hand, and a *socially oriented* one, on the other. After many years of study, in 2011, Paul C. Light, a harsh critic of the personality approach to social entrepreneurship, actually came to the cautious conclusion that social entrepreneurs are not only a breed of business entrepreneurs: they have a businesslike thinking and act similarly to high achievers, but they are different in their deep commitment to a social cause. Simms and Robinson (2005) go a step further and suggest that social entrepreneurs have dual personalities, split between activists and business entrepreneurs. So let's take a deeper look into what constitutes these two parts of the social entrepreneurial personality.

3.3.1 Entrepreneurial Personality

"Social entrepreneurs are one species in the genus entrepreneur" (Dees, 1998, p. 3)

Social entrepreneurs are often seen as a subspecies of the business entrepreneur (e.g., Achleitner, Heister, and Stahl, 2007). Various researchers have found personality traits in social entrepreneurs which are associated with business entrepreneurs. For example, Thompson, Alvy, and Lees (2000) list numerous characteristics shared by social and business entrepreneurs: e.g., ambitious, and able to communicate and recruit resources. Martin and Osberg (2007) recognize that the social entrepreneur, like the business entrepreneur, is inspired by the unsatisfying equilibrium, creatively develops a solution, takes direct action, has the courage to start and the fortitude to continue. Perrini and Vurro (2006) also name various factors in which social entrepreneurs are similar to business entrepreneurs: entrepreneurial aptitude, risk-tolerance, strong desire to control, founding orientation, unhappy with the status quo, building of portfolios of resources, and an aptitude for networking.

Yet, there is a difference between the understanding of what an entrepreneurial character is, especially between society and science. In line with the definition of the social entrepreneurial personality above, this chapter understands *entrepreneurial personality* to be a combination of stable traits common to entrepreneurial actors, uncommon within the rest of the population, which causes them to act the way they do. Further disagreement exists with regard to which exact traits establish such an entrepreneurial personality. Numerous traits have been associated with the entrepreneurial personality, some studies listing over 30 potential characteristics (Cromie, 2000).

The inclusion of a single trait is not enough to capture the complexity of the entire construct of the entrepreneurial personality. Typically, five traits reoccur when speaking of the entrepreneurial personality: *risk-taking propensity*, *innovativeness*, *need for achievement*, *need for independence* and *proactiveness*. Let's review them shortly.

Risk-taking propensity

Risk-taking is especially interesting as entrepreneurship is an area defined by high levels of uncertainty. Entrepreneurs can, therefore, be expected to be risk-bearing people as they choose the risky path of entrepreneurship. This trait is used frequently in entrepreneurship research. Research to date also suggests a high level of risk-taking propensity in social entrepreneurs. While no specific empirical work has been done, anecdotal studies describe the social entrepreneur as risk-friendly (e.g., Frances, 2008; Mort, Weerawardena, and Carnegie, 2003; Peredo and McLean, 2006). The UK GEM report also shows that, on average, social entrepreneurs are less likely to let fear of failure stop them from starting a venture – even though they still show less risk-taking propensity than commercial entrepreneurs. Dees (1998) confirms that social entrepreneurs act boldly in the face of the challenges they meet. Therefore, risk-taking propensity is considered part of the entrepreneurial personality of a social entrepreneur.

Innovativeness

Schumpeter already recognized that the person founding an enterprise must be willing to “reform or revolutionize” (Bönte and Jarosch, 2010, p. 7, quoting Schumpeter 1934). Other early thought leaders in business entrepreneurship, such as Peter F. Drucker highlighted the importance of innovativeness, as the core of entrepreneurial activity. Innovative character traits are also found in social entrepreneurs (e.g., Leadbeater, 1997; Mort et al., 2003; Peredo and McLean, 2006). For example, Dees (1998) attests that they engage in continuous innovation. Therefore, innovativeness is included as part of the entrepreneurial personality of a social entrepreneur.

Need for achievement

In entrepreneurial research, need for achievement can be understood as “a person’s need to strive hard to attain success” (Cromie, 2000, p. 16). This trait was also mentioned early on in the field, David C. McClelland even placing it in the centre of entrepreneurial activity. As with the previous traits, anecdotal evidence in social entrepreneurship research points to the relevance of need for achievement. Some of the adjectives used are ambitious (Winkler, 2008), relentless (Frances, 2008), and determined (Leadbeater, 1997). Dees (1998) states that social entrepreneurs relentlessly pursue new opportunities. Therefore, need for achievement is integrated within the entrepreneurial personality of a social entrepreneur.

Need for independence

Studies have shown that entrepreneurs find it hard to work within rules and boundaries (Cromie, 2000). This is associated with a need for independence or autonomy. Similar to the dispute over the existence of a team-less social entrepreneur, acting as an individual hero, some researchers disagree with the idea that social entrepreneurs work independently (e.g., Light, 2011; Seanor and Meaton, 2007). Nonetheless, others say that social entrepreneurs, too, prefer self-determined, independent work (e.g., Barendsen and Gardner, 2004; Winkler, 2008), and are the sole individuals who lead these active organisations (Leadbeater, 1997). Therefore, need for independence is considered an element of the entrepreneurial personality of a social entrepreneur.

Proactiveness

Proactiveness is considered as an entrepreneurial trait, as those willing to shape things are most likely the ones who become entrepreneurs. Again, social entrepreneurial studies hint at the presence of this trait in social entrepreneurs. While Mort, Weerawardena, and Carnegie (2003) specifically describe social entrepreneurs as proactive, Peredo and McLean (2006) circumscribe the trait by stating that they take advantage of opportunities around them. Therefore, proactiveness is added to the construct of the entrepreneurial personality of a social entrepreneur.

To sum up, risk-taking propensity, innovativeness, need for achievement, need for independence and proactiveness are identified as elements of the entrepreneurial personality.

Besides identifying similarities, all the papers comparing social and business entrepreneurs point out the one core difference between the two: the goal of their enterprise. While business entrepreneurs are said to strive for profit, social entrepreneurs focus on their social mission. It is based on this fact, that there may exist a socially oriented personality alongside the entrepreneurial personality in the case of social entrepreneurs.

3.3.2 Prosocial Personality

"[...] Social entrepreneurs are more than another breed of business entrepreneur"
(Light, 2011, p. 44)

Many anecdotal works on social entrepreneurship outline the passion the entrepreneurs develop for their cause, often pointing out the selflessness of their deeds. This commitment towards addressing social injustice is considered a sign of prosocial behaviour and suggests the existence of a prosocial personality. Penner and Finkelstein (1998) define a prosocial personality as "an enduring tendency to think about the welfare and rights of other people, to feel concern and empathy for them, and to act in a way that benefits them" (p. 526).

Many researchers recognize this existence of a social drive in social entrepreneurs. In this sense, Guclu and Dees (2002) write "Social entrepreneurs must have the same commitment and determination as a traditional business entrepreneur, plus a deep passion for the social cause, minus an expectation of significant financial gains" (p. 13).

To further specify what defines this social element, researchers have begun to focus on personality aspects. In a rather abstract manner, Drayton (2002) names "strong ethical fibre" (p. 124) as a necessary ingredient to becoming a social entrepreneur. Further researchers attest that social entrepreneurs have values from early on and show non-egotistical behaviour (e.g., Hemingway, 2005). Others identify specific character traits representing this social aspect in social entrepreneurs' personalities. Mair and Noboa (2006) recognize an additional trait for social entrepreneurs: "[...] many of these attributes may equally apply to business entrepreneurial behaviour, with one exception, receptivity to the feelings of others, or put differently, empathy" (p. 123f.). This concept is also recognized by Bhawe, Jain and Gupta (2007), whose qualitative study shows that social entrepreneurs have a strong

empathy for people affected by social problems. Both studies regarding empathy obtain their insight from work on prosocial character traits. This is supported by numerous studies in social psychology, which have shown a link between a prosocial personality and prosocial behaviour such as helping or volunteering (e.g., Bierhoff, 2010; Davis et al., 1999). Hereby, those actions are considered as prosocial behaviour which society sees as generally beneficial. In this sense, social entrepreneurship can be considered prosocial behaviour. Hence, the prosocial personality is a relevant element when looking at social entrepreneurship.

The prosocial personality is made up of the traits moving people to act in a way benefiting other people than themselves. This phenomenon and related behaviour has been treated extensively in general social psychology research to date. One finding has been that there seems to be a prosocial personality, which is consistent over time (Eisenberg et al., 2002). The related characteristics cause a person to act when the distress of others arouses them (Penner et al., 2005). Prosocial personality is associated with helping, social responsibility, care orientation, consideration of others, and sympathy (Eisenberg et al., 2002). In line with the definitions of the social entrepreneurial and entrepreneurial personality above, this chapter understands *prosocial personality* to be a combination of stable traits common to prosocial actors, uncommon within the rest of the population, which cause them to act the way they do.

As in the case of entrepreneurial personality, there is much discussion of what traits make up the prosocial personality, a quest initiated by Louis A. Penner in the 1980s. In general, they are traits which foster helping attitudes. Here, Hans-Werner Bierhoff's concept is adapted and includes the dimensions of empathy and social responsibility in the prosocial personality.

Empathy

Empathy is a central core of all constellations of prosocial personality. The construct comes from social psychology and describes the ability of a person to put oneself in another's shoes. Frequently, it is split into affective and cognitive empathy. Affective empathy means the actual emotional compassion with another, cognitive empathy means the ability to perceive the emotional state of other people. Researchers have seen that empathy supports social entrepreneurial intention formation (Mair and Noboa, 2006). Bhawe, Jain, and Gupta (2007) assume that empathy is necessary to be able to identify opportunities in social entrepreneurship. Therefore, the concept of empathy is included as part of the prosocial personality.

Sense of social responsibility

Sense of social responsibility is the trait which causes a sense of obligation to assist those in distress. Hereby, the inner conviction to help overweighs the costs of doing so. This aspect shows itself in numerous papers on volunteering. When studying volunteers in several countries, Hustinx, Handy, Cnaan, Brudney, Pessi and Yamauchi (2010) discover that the number one motivation to help is that the people find it "important to help others" (p. 363). Within social entrepreneurship research, while the topic of social responsibility has not

been addressed specifically, it seems to be an inherent assumption in line with this choice of career path. As mentioned, authors such as Bornstein (2004) underline the selflessness of social entrepreneurs, and Drayton (2002) highlights their 'ethical fibre'. These aspects indicate the presence of a sense of social responsibility in social entrepreneurs. Therefore, the concept of social responsibility is included as part of the prosocial personality.

3.3.3 The Social Entrepreneurial Personality

In summary, it can be expected that social entrepreneurs have both characteristics considered as typically entrepreneurial, as well as those associated with prosocial behaviour. The summary of the seven identified traits can be seen in the **Figure 3.4** below.

Figure 3.4 The characteristics within the social entrepreneurial personality



Own illustration

3.4 Case Study

In his successful book, “How to Change the World”, David Bornstein takes the time to reflect on Florence Nightingale, who he considers to be a prime example of a social entrepreneur. While Bornstein reflects on large stretches of Nightingale’s life, this case study focuses on the early years of her social work, as he described them in his book.

While many young girls enjoyed playing with dolls, even as a child, Nightingale felt drawn towards helping those in need. At a young age, she watched by sick beds and tried to heal hurt animals. Growing older, this wish to help become stronger, and she dreamed of becoming a nurse. Yet, in the England of the 19th century, nursing was not considered a suitable work for a lady from society’s upper class. Concerned, Nightingale’s father forbade her to choose this profession. Upset by not being able to attend nursing school, Nightingale thought of alternate possibilities to come closer to her ideal. While travelling with her family, she frequently visited clinics, and at home, she read books and reports on hospitals and medicine. Becoming further infatuated with the topic, Nightingale chose to further argue with her parents, and after four years, was finally allowed to take a training course for nursing in Germany.

Entering the profession in a hospital in London, Nightingale became fully devoted to her job, refusing to let anything distract her. For example, she rejected all suitors and took all other means to remain independent, and thereby able to optimally pursue her work. Soon, she received an interesting offer from Istanbul: War was waging, and English soldiers were fighting alongside the Turkish, against the Russians. She did not only agree to take charge of the military hospitals in the region, she also joined together 38 nurses to accompany her. Arriving in the war zone, she encountered chaos. Hygienic circumstances were abysmal, dirt piling in beds and on clothes. The necessary medical supplies were not available, water scarce, and numerous diseases were leading to death rates of close to 50%. At first, army officials refused to work with her, a simply woman from London. Yet soon, their desperation led them to accept her.

Immediately, Nightingale took charge. In her actions, she was described as strict and stern, with great precision and determination. Ordering 200 scrubbing brushes, she instructed her staff to thoroughly clean the wards and ensure clothes and linen were washed. Failing to acquire the necessary medicine and supplies through the standard routes, Nightingale invested the £30,000 collected prior to her trip to buy them, taking over the army’s deliverer’s job. Likewise, whichever obstacles she encountered, she fought, argued, and negotiated until a solution was found. One after the other, she built new wards, kitchens, laundry services, and introduced booking keeping and strict hygienic standards. Additionally, she made sure that the personal comforts were met for the injured soldiers, introducing recreational space, and consoling those in despair with a soft voice. Within a few months, the death rate in the hospitals fell to 2%, making her an idol of the soldiers, and later of the English people.

Questions

1. The text offers cues on Florence Nightingale's personality. Please go through the case study and look for traits she may have had.
2. Please match the description of Florence Nightingale's personality with the individual social entrepreneurial personality traits we learned about in this chapter.
3. Which aspects match the suggestions made in the chapter? Which don't? Please discuss the implications of your findings.

3.5 Further Reading

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